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## A FRIENDLY TOWN

By G. P.

WAR and the military police have done much to make the town inhospitable. The war has shattered its churches and levelled or gutted its Place de la Ville. And the military police, as soon as we had set foot in the place, thundered their challenge in great black and white notice boards at the main roads and approaches:

NO SOUVENIRS IN THIS TOWN.  
KEEP OUT!

And again:

IF ON DUTY, ENTER.  
IF NOT, "BEAT IT."

Yet in some queer way the place has defied both of its traducers. It remains "the friendly town" of Mr. Lucas's admirable phrase, and virtue is not gone out of it. There was a sense of friendship and shelter about its silent streets even when we first entered it, and its civilians (with no right to be there at that time and no provision for their rationing) could have been numbered on your two fists. I do not know why this sense of urbanity should have persisted, for one's confidence was not untested. The Engineers were still busy with the booby traps—as a periodical explosion made known. And I never entered what seemed more profoundly sinister quarters than my first billet. We had been hardened to the abomination of desolation; ruins where nothing save a rat or a soldier would look for shelter had lost their grimness. But this quiet house, with its solitary shell-burst and shattered

windows, was another and subtler matter. Most of its furniture lay intact, some of it undisturbed; there were dusty glasses and crockery to borrow. Entered at dusk, it had an air of keeping its own heavy secret, a secret with which it would pay one not to meddle. Yet in the morning I found I had misjudged the poor house. Its secret was not malign—life had been stunned there too suddenly for it to be brought back without a phase of bewilderment. That was all. By breakfast-time it was collecting its scattered wits, and by lunch (when we had bound up a shell-hole in the floor) it was positively companionable. I looked out from the empty frame of an upper window on to streets that seemed to have laid themselves out to prove that even a solitude can be brisk. White walls and shutters carried their shell-holes with a brave face and shrugged their shoulders at the pock-marks of shrapnel. I think it must be the consistent whiteness of the place that does the trick. "Ah, très propre!" one of the faithful who had risked starvation to return to it assured me afterwards. "Très propre avant la guerre!" And *très propre*, in spite of the war, it was determined to remain—as determined as a pink-faced lad shaving at a shell-hole. A most indomitable little town, convinced that though cleanliness may not be next to godliness it is at the very least the first condition of sanity.

I do not quite know why I should patronise the place in this way. By rights it is not a little town at all, but a venerable city. For a year it has been one of the great names of the war, and its fall was

the last stage of the end. Had I access to books I could inquire into its distinguished past and give you something with more body to it than the mere impressions of one who did not even trouble to discover the name of the broken church that is still a splendid rival to the cathedral. I think I call it little because, for all its past and present, it is still small enough to be easily compassed by one man's knowledge and affection. When a man says he loves some great modern accumulation of bricks and mortar, he does, in truth, but love his own selected parts of it. The greater the town the greater the inseparable evil. If I say "little" of a place of more intimate proportions I use it as a term not of condescension but of virtue. Perhaps, too, an old echo rang in my head as we marched out of its dreaming streets that quiet Sunday morning. "What little town . . . is emptied of its folk this pious morn?" And it has, I swear, caught something of the Attic secret—cleanliness without austerity, and a sanity unburdened by that gravity which is "a mysterious carriage of the body invented to conceal defects of the mind."

There, thank Heaven! the analogy ends. The streets of this little town shall not "silent be for evermore." When we returned to it a month later the armistice had been signed and the last barrage had been lifted for ever. The civilians are returning every day. Where they were to be discovered by twos they are now to be numbered by the hundred or so, and they are rationed by law and not by charity. I noticed the other morning that a café of sorts had opened its doors—any day now may bring some first attempt at a shop. Bland Chinamen squat, incongruous,

about the ruins of the Hôtel de Ville or straighten the more littered ruins into a way for traffic. The official sort of tourists have arrived. I found a party of what their pilot described to me as "American religious journalists" clambering over the heap of fallen masonry in the church—sombre, respectable folk with God-fearing umbrellas and mufflers. A leave train arrives and departs each day, and at whiles the shattered station disgorges a fresh detachment of returned prisoners. But I would not give you the impression of a place suddenly quickened into new life. There are wide, unnatural silences still waiting to be filled, and cobbled ways where your heels ring noisily but desperately alone. And at night the darkness seems especially unpeopled. Yet everywhere there is a sense of rising hope and the old values of life restored to men. Over it all, poised on the very tip of the cathedral's climbing fabric, broods a huge figure of Christ. It is not the tortured Christ of the wayside Calvaries—that would be a fitter symbol for the utter agony of Ypres and the Somme. This figure is thorn-crowned, but its hands are clasped in prayer, and its head is bent over them and on to the city. By a strange chance a shell has left the image completely riven. Only the front half remains against the level December sky, but from all distances and most viewpoints it appears intact. So, perhaps, with the city for which it prays—something of the letter has perished, but the spirit and significance remain to make alive. The great figure towers above; and below a brave town stirs itself uneasily, and prepares to throw off its nightmare.

—*Manchester Guardian.*